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A Geostrategic Context Research Paper

Colonel Mark Masters/Class 1996

Lt Col Mark Christian

Lt Col Douglas Lengenfelder

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Dr. Hugh DeSantis

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“The United States has been involved in three major regional wars in Asia - Korea Vietnam and the Persian Gulf - in the past four decades To preclude another one, [Secretary of Defense] Perry said, the United States must maintain a strong deterrent force in the Asian Pacific region

Air Force Times, 26 Feb 96

Introduction

The “Southeast Asia” region consists of two major sub-regions, peninsular and archipelagic regions (Wiarda 151) The ten primary countries of Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam comprise the largest nations in the Southeast Asia (SEA) region These ten countries are the primary focus of this paper due to their relative importance to U S national interests

This essay will define and prioritize the U S national interests relative to SEA as well as the context of political, economic, social, cultural and military trends Also identified are the potential challenges, threats and opportunities to U S interests and current U S policies Last, the prioritized objectives of current U S policy and the means to influence and advance these interests will be analyzed through the available tools of statecraft

United States National Interests in SEA

Southeast Asia is the fastest-growing region of the world today in economic terms, with annual growth rates averaging over 7% for the past five years in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (Department of Defense 6) While it is not the most important region to the United States in geostrategic terms, its phenomenal growth and critical sea lines of communication (over 70% of all world seaborne trade goods transit its waterways) insure its place as an integral and vital element of the world economy Curiously, although the U S public sees no vital interests in this geostrategic area (Reilly, 20), the U S foreign policy of ‘Engagement and Enlargement’ recognizes vital interests in this region which require significant attention The prioritized U S national interests in the SEA region can be summarized as follows

- Peace, stability, and security of national boundaries
- Commercial access to free and open markets
- Freedom of navigation
- Growth of democratic governments
- Prevent the rise of a hostile hegemonic power or coalition
- Prevent a regional arms race and proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

These national interests are vital to the security and economic well being of the United States. The need for peace and stability in the region are critical to ensure access to open and free markets with the United States economy becoming more dependent. This trade dependency relative to the importation of raw materials and export of products to these growing economies requires clear U.S. strategy and policies to maintain these interests. The distance and dependence on free access through the critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs) for international trade and deployment of U.S. forces to the Persian Gulf region are vital interests. A stable SEA region is also a vital interest that requires the U.S. to encourage development of friendly democratic governments providing access to these markets. To further insure political and economic stability in SEA, the U.S. seeks to keep potential hostile hegemonic powers, such as China, from dominating the region and thereby impacting U.S. interests. Thus, developing and maintaining relationships with SEA nations militaries helps deter potential hostile hegemonic powers.

Context of Political, Economic, Social, Cultural and Military Trends

The current growth and stability of the region mark it as one of the true success stories in the world today, with U.S. policy oriented toward maintaining the status quo, tempered with occasional pressure for greater democratization and access to national markets. Most trends in the region are positive. Economic growth and increased public education have led to the formation of

large middle classes in Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, with a corresponding strengthening of democratic values and institutions. United States exports to the region are growing twice as fast as exports to Europe. Per capita, these Asian countries also import more than their European counterparts (Department of Defense 7). Fertility rates and population growth are becoming more controlled due to widespread public education and contraceptive availability. Regional economic organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are promoting extensive consultation and the peaceful resolution of issues like trade and territorial boundaries.

Despite the progress and stability this region has achieved in the last decade, several significant challenges remain. A growing dependence on oil to fuel the ongoing economic boom places SEA second behind North America in its requirement for imported oil, 70% of which must be imported (Department of Defense 7). Territorial disputes over the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands in the South China Sea threaten to polarize regional governments. Succession of power in China is uncertain, and leaves questions about the extent of Chinese power and intentions in the post-Deng era. Narcotics trafficking continues to plague the region. Last, qualitative increases in the armed forces of the region could affect long-term stability.

Current U.S. policy addresses these regional trends and seeks to exploit opportunities for improved economic and military conditions through both bilateral and multilateral organizations. Membership or participation in security and economic organizations such as ASEAN, and the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, provide a means to address the trends and issues that affect U.S. national interests in SEA.

Challenges, Threats and Opportunities for U.S. Interests.

United States security issues pose many challenges, threats and opportunities for U.S. national interests. Perhaps the greatest challenge and potential threat to U.S. interests is China.

Although China is not considered a part of the traditional area defined as SEA, it plays an important and expanding role both in military and economic terms. If China's emerging new political leadership becomes a hostile hegemonic force in the region, SEA countries will look for a counter to this threat. The balance becomes either Russia, Japan, U.S., India, multilateral coalitions, Australia or some combination of the above. Already the Chinese claim ownership of disputed territories in the South China Sea and have established a naval presence in this area with a base in the Coco Islands, south of Burma (Behrends, 1996). China's claim to these international waters could ultimately impact U.S. and U.S. allied nations access to transit the critical SLOCs, impede the international right of freedom of navigation, and restrict access to SEA markets. China also continues to move large numbers of Chinese into Laotian territory (Behrends 1996). A series of moves that may be the start of a long-term Chinese goal to gain hegemonic control of the highly productive SEA agricultural and resource rich region. If the goal of the Chinese government is to gain hegemonic control of SEA, U.S. policy and supporting actions must be clear and deter China from achieving this potential goal.

Other regional challenges include stabilizing long-standing ethnic, national and territorial rivalries between countries such as Vietnam and Cambodia or Vietnam and China. The continued existence of the Khmer Rouge insurgency which rose to power and was later deposed follows two decades of war and chaos that threatens the stability of Cambodia and its new and fragile democratic government (United States 18). Furthermore, the Abu Sayyaf Group, a Muslim guerrilla extremist group, is active in the Philippines and the Pattani United Liberation Front, Muslim separatists, are engaged in anti-government violence in Thailand. (Patterns of Global Terrorism, 4). The challenge to the U.S. is to provide support to resolving these disputes through peaceful forums such as ASEAN and support Cambodia's government by providing continued reconstruction and non-lethal humanitarian assistance.

The possible development of a conventional arms race and WMD is not an imminent threat. This is due to lessened tensions in SEA and lack of sophisticated technology to build nuclear weapons. The absence of a threat does not negate the need for continued intelligence monitoring for events and trends that may trigger a race or development of WMD in the region. The U S must continue to strengthen its leadership role with SEA countries lest a diminished U S presence, whether real or perceived, gives rise to Chinese hegemonic control to the region and may trigger the SEA nations to arm themselves to meet the threat. Also the U S should press the SEA countries to participate in treaties and conventions such as the Non Proliferation Treaty, Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions and maintain regional stability through U S alliances, bilateral treaties and agreements.

Narcotics (e.g. heroin) flowing from SEA is also a threat and challenge to U S interests in the Pacific and the continental United States. The trafficking of narcotics to the U S undermines the U S economy through lost job productivity, creates corruption within governments and adds to health and social costs. This diverts national resources from other pressing social, economic and military issues. The U S can promote closer ties through coordination of actions between the SEA countries police and military forces to halt the flow of drugs at the source in transit.

Increasing economic ties in the SEA region is a challenge to the U S. Encouraging free and open markets for U S exports remains a challenge to countries that are emerging as economic powerhouses (Pacific Rim Dragons) and although the ASEAN Free-Trade Agreement (AFTA) appears to do this, the 15 year implementation time frame (Everett, 127) is likely to nullify the desired outcome. The elimination of trade barriers between nations in the region is key to developing open and free markets. Economic growth increases the standard of living, promotes the recognition of human rights, and either protects democratic governments or encourages the emergence of such through the increase in trade and growth in the region. The U S can continue to

encourage the expansion of forums like APEC to increase the economic growth and elimination of trade barriers. Continued access to U.S. markets provides the means for developing countries such as Vietnam to gain stability and possibly lead to democracy and human rights for these people.

Many of the SEA challenges and threats are recognized by U.S. current policy. The implementation of this policy is certainly difficult if not properly coordinated and executed with all U.S. governmental agencies. One case that may lead to further repercussions in the SEA region is the conflicting policy execution toward China. Currently, the U.S. seeks to engage China through economic engagement and regional security discussions at forums such as ASEAN and ARF. The presence of Chinese naval forces in the South China Sea and Coco Islands and threat to use force to make good its territorial claims runs counter to a peaceful solution to these issues. Much of the Chinese adventurism in SEA can be attributed to conflicting administration policy execution actions or inaction. A clear and enforceable U.S. policy relative to China's use of force in the region is paramount to a peaceful negotiated settlement among the SEA nations. The failing of the Chinese government to abide with a political settlement should result in an increased U.S. military presence with support from the SEA governments and militaries to counter China's hegemonic claims.

United States Policy Objectives and Statecraft

The benign neglect of U.S. foreign policy toward SEA in the 1980s and early 1990s was more an emotional repercussion of U.S. involvement with Vietnam than it was a manifestation of planned policy. This certainly contradicts our current policy of engagement and enlargement which has resulted in re-opening U.S. relations with Vietnam. U.S.-SEA policy is, as in most regional areas, tri-focused with an approach in each of the economic, military and diplomatic areas.

U S military policy reflects a commitment to continued leadership in Asian affairs, with forward presence as its cornerstone. Forward presence involves forward basing of 100,000 troops in order to

- deter conflict
- allow rapid and flexible crisis response
- enhance U S ability to influence a wide spectrum of events
- create economy of force
- overcome handicaps of time and distance (especially difficult dimension in this theater)

The U S also seeks to maintain strong bilateral ties with several nations to insure prolonged access to forward bases, and backs this up with an aggressive program of military-to-military contacts, combined exercises and deployments to insure a visible and continuous presence. Furthermore, regional security is promoted through foreign military sales totaling almost \$1.5 billion to Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand and International Military Education and Training totaling \$2.22 billion to Cambodia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand (Defense 95 Almanac, 35-37). This not only creates a U S -SEA cultural exchange but fosters an appreciation for U S institutions and thought processes such as civilian control of the military.

Economically, the U S seeks to share responsibility for maintaining regional security by supporting ASEAN, whose stated aim is to prevent Southeast Asia from becoming an area of strategic competition among regional powers, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), a consultative body designed to cultivate habits of consultation and cooperation on security issues by conveying governmental positions and easing tensions. U S policy also supports efforts to continue and enhance economic prosperity in the region principally through the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

The third leg of U S policy in the region is the political and diplomatic effort to encourage democratic reform. The emergence of a sizable middle class in Malaysia and Thailand has fostered strong and self-sustaining democratic institutions in these nations. Lesser but significant progress has also been achieved in the Philippines and Cambodia. The U S must be cognizant of the economic and political support required from these and other emerging democracies to provide a stable basis for internal political transitions in the future.

Within this framework of current U S policy, and mindful of the U S objectives of stability, peace, access to markets, freedom of navigation, and prevention of a hostile hegemonic power base, the future for SEA is embodied in a multilateral framework. Multilateralism provides a conduit toward economic growth through freedom of trade and tariff reductions. Furthermore, it provides a forum for dealing with issues such as copyright protection. It is almost the only approach toward military stability when considering the disparity between China and SEA and it is an outstanding avenue for diplomatic interaction within the region. However, the key concept behind multilateralism in SEA is that it provides an essential method of allowing the U S to remain engaged in SEA. The primary U S interest in SEA remains an economic interest. Access to the future dragons of the Pacific Rim along with the SLOCs can certainly be considered major, if not vital. Protecting U S access to a stable SEA at a reasonable cost is probable within the multilateral framework of organizations such as ASEAN and APEC and while SEA may not be a top runner in U S priorities through the remaining 20th Century, it already forebodes the significance in today's world where economic power is as important as military.

Conclusion

The majority of the U S interest within SEA is an economic interest. With reduced military strife and the Asian Tiger model of economic growth, the region is becoming the world's next economic wonder. Although the economic significance will not rival that of China or Japan, it

provides an outstanding opportunity for economic growth markets for the U S. Thus the primary priority for U S policy within this region is economic access. However, this does not mean the military concern is off the radar scope in this area.

China and its threat of becoming an hegemonic power within this region is the areas largest threat. The continued growth of regional stability through U S military bilateral exchanges and emphasis of multilateral organizations is a promising approach toward military stability within SEA.

Finally, diplomatically, the U S needs to continue encouraging the growth of democratic institutions within the region. The successful engagement of the ASEAN nations will be an extremely useful method of controlling China's ability to shape SEA relations in the future.

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